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IN MEMORY OF

HARRIET MINOT PITMAN

THE CHARNEL ROSE

By CONRAD AIKEN

THE CHARNEL ROSE, *and Other Poems*

NOCTURNE OF REMEMBERED SPRING, *and Other Poems*

THE JIG OF FORSLIN, *A Symphony*

TURNS AND MOVIES, *and Other Tales in Verse*

EARTH TRIUMPHANT, *and Other Tales in Verse*

THE CHARNEL ROSE
SENLIN: A BIOGRAPHY

AND OTHER POEMS

By

CONRAD AIKEN

BOSTON
THE FOUR SEAS COMPANY
1918

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812
A29
3Ch 2

The Four Seas Press
Boston, Mass., U. S. A.

TO MY WIFE

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SENLIN: A BIOGRAPHY

[1918]

SENLIN: A BIOGRAPHY

I. His Dark Origins

I.

Senlin sits before us, and we see him . . .
He smokes his pipe before us, and we hear him . . .
Is he small, with reddish hair,
Does he light his pipe with a meditative stare,
And a pointed flame reflected in both eyes?
Is he sad and happy and foolish and wise? . . .
Did no one see him enter the doors of the city,
Looking about him at roofs and trees and skies? . . .
'I stepped from a cloud,' he says, 'as evening fell,
I walked on the sound of a bell;
I ran with winged heels along a gust;
Or is it true that I laughed and sprang from the dust? . . .
Has no one, in a great autumnal forest,
When the wind bares the trees with mournful tone,
Heard the sad horn of Senlin slowly blown? . . .
Has no one, on a mountain in the spring,
Heard Senlin sing?

Perhaps I came alone on a snow-white horse,
Riding alone from the deep-starred night.
Perhaps I came on a ship whose sails were music,
Sailing from moon or sun on a river of light.'

He lights his pipe with a streaked and pointed flame . . .
'Yet, there were many autumns before I came,
And many springs. And more will come, long after
There is no horn from me, or song, or laughter.'

The city dissolves about us, and its walls
Become an ancient forest. There is no sound
Except where an old twig tires and falls;
Or a lizard among the dead leaves crawls;
Or a flutter is heard in darkness along the ground.
Has Senlin become a forest? Do we walk in Senlin?
Is Senlin the wood we walk in,—ourselves,—the world?
Senlin! we cry . . . Senlin! again . . . No answer,
Only soft broken echoes backward hurled . . .

Ye we would say this is no wood at all,
But a small white room with lights upon the wall;
And Senlin, before us, pale, with reddish hair,
Lights his pipe with a meditative stare.

Senlin: A Biography

II.

Senlin, walking beside us, swings his arms
And turns his head to look at walls and trees.
The wind comes whistling from the shrill stars of winter,
The lights are jewels, the black roots freeze.
'Did I, then, stretch from the bitter earth like these,
Reaching upward with slow and rigid pain
To seek, in another air, myself again?' . . .
(Immense and solitary in a desert of rocks
Behold a bewildered oak
With white clouds screaming through its leafy brain! . . .)
'Or was I the single ant, or tinier thing,
That crept from the rocks of buried time
And dedicated its holy life to climb
From atom to beetling atom, jagged grain to grain,
Patiently out of the darkness we call sleep
Into the hollow gigantic world of light
Thinking the sky to be its destined shell,
Hoping to fit it well!—'

The city dissolves about us; and its walls
Are mountainous rocks cruelly carved with wind;

The Charnel Rose

Sand streams down their wasting sides, and sand
Mounts upward slowly about them: foot and hand
We crawl and bleed among them. Is this Senlin?
In the desert of Senlin must we live and die?
We hear the decay of rocks, the crash of boulders,
The snarling of sand on sand. 'Senlin!' we cry.
'Senlin!' again . . . Our shadows revolve in silence
Under the soulless brilliance of blue sky . . .

Yet we would say these are no rocks at all,
Nor desert of sand . . . for here by a city wall
White lights jewel the evening, black roots freeze,
And Senlin turns his head to look at trees.

Senlin: A Biography

III.

It is evening, Senlin says, and in the evening,
By a silent shore, by a far distant sea,
White unicorns come gravely down to the water.
In the lilac dusk they come, they are white and stately,
Stars hang over the purple waveless sea;
A sea on which no sail was ever lifted,
Where a human voice was never heard.
The shadows of vague hills are dark on the water,
The silent stars seem silently to sing.
And gravely come white unicorns down to the water,
One by one they come and drink their fill;
And daisies shine like stars on the darkened hill . . .

It is evening, Senlin says, and in the evening
The leaves on the trees, abandoned by the light,
Look to the earth, and whisper, and are still.
The bat with horned wings, tumbling through the darkness,
Breaks the web, and the spider falls to the ground.
The starry dewdrop gathers upon the oakleaf,
Clings to the edge, and falls without a sound.
Do maidens spread their white palms to the starlight
And walk three steps to the east and clearly sing?

The Charnel Rose

Do dewdrops fall like a shower of stars from willows?
Has the small moon a ghostly ring? . . .
White skeletons dance on the moonlit grass,
Singing maidens are buried in deep graves,
The stars hang over a sea like polished glass . . .
And solemnly one by one in the darkness there
Neighing far off on the haunted air
White unicorns come gravely down to the water . . .

No silver bells are heard. The westering moon
Lights the pale floors of caverns by the sea.
Wet weed hangs on the rock. In shimmering pools
Left on the rocks by the receding sea
Starfish slowly turn their white and brown
Or writhe on the naked rocks and drown.
Do sea-girls haunt these caves—do we hear faint singing?
Do we hear from under the sea a thin bell ringing?
Was that a white hand lifted among the bubbles
And fallen softly back?
No, these shores and caverns all are silent,
Dead in the moonlight; only, far above,
On the smooth contours of these headlands,

Senlin: A Biography

White amid the eternal black,
One by one in the moonlight there
Neighing far off on the haunted air
The unicorns come down to the sea.

IV.

Senlin, walking before us in the sunlight,
Bending his long legs in a peculiar way,
Goes to his work with thoughts of the universe.
His hands are in his pockets, he smokes his pipe,
He is happily conscious of roofs and skies;
And, without turning his head, he turns his eyes
To regard white horses drawing a small white hearse.

The sky is brilliant between the roofs,
The windows flash in the yellow sun,
On the hard pavement ring the hoofs,
The light wheels softly run.
Bright particles of sunlight fall,
Quiver and flash, gyrate and burn,
Honey-like heat flows down the wall,
The white spokes dazzle and turn . . .

Senlin walking before us in the sunlight
Regards the hearse with an introspective eye.
'Is it my childhood there,' he asks,
'Sealed in a hearse and hurrying by?'

Senlin: A Biography

He taps with his trowel against a stone;
The trowel sings with a silver tone.

'Neverthless, I know this well.
Bury it deep and toll a bell,
Bury it under land or sea,
You cannot bury it save in me.'

It is as if his soul had become a city,
With noisily peopled streets, and through these streets
Senlin himself comes driving a small white hearse. . .
'Senlin!' we cry. He does not turn his head.
But is that Senlin?—or is this city Senlin,—
Quietly watching the burial of its dead?
Dumbly observing the cortège of its dead?

Yet we would say that all this is but madness:
Around a distant corner turns the hearse.
And Senlin walks before us in the sunlight
Happily conscious of his universe.

v.

In the hot noon, in an old and savage garden,
The peach-tree grows. Its ugly cruel roots
Rend and rifle the silent earth for moisture.
Above, in the blue, hang warm and golden fruits.
Look, how the cancerous roots crack mould and stone!
Earth, if she had a voice, would wail her pain.
Is she the victim? Or is the tree the victim? . . .
Delicate blossoms opened in the rain,
Black bees flew among them in the sunlight,
And sacked them ruthlessly; and now a bird
Hangs, sharp-eyed, in the leaves, and pecks at the fruit;
And the peach-tree dreams, and does not say a word . . .

. . . Senlin, tapping his trowel against a stone,
Observes this tree he planted: it is his own . . .

'You will think it strange,' says Senlin, 'but this tree
Utters profound things in this garden,
And in its silence speaks to me.
I have sensations, when I stand beneath it,
As if its leaves looked at me, and could see:

And these thin leaves, even in windless air,
Seem to be whispering me a choral music
Insubstantial but debonair.
"Regard," they seem to say,
"Our idiot root, which going its brutal way
Has cracked your garden wall!
Ugly, is it not?
A desecration of this place . . .
And yet, without it, could we exist at all?"
Thus, rustling with importance, they seem to me
To make their apology;
And while they apologize
Ask me a wary question with their eyes.
Yes, it is true their origin is low—
Brutish and dull and cruel . . . and it is true
Their roots have cracked the wall. But do we know
The leaves less cruel—the root less beautiful?
Sometimes it seems as if there grew
In the dull garden of my mind
A tree like this, which, singing with delicate leaves,
Yet cracks the walls with cruel roots and blind.
Sometimes, indeed, it appears to me
That I myself am such a tree . . .'

The Charnel Rose

. . . And as we hear from Senlin these strange words
So, slowly, in the sunlight, he becomes this tree:
And among the pleasant leaves hang sharp-eyed birds
While cruel roots dig downward secretly.

Senlin: A Biography

VI.

Rustling among his odds and ends of knowledge
Suddenly, to his wonder, Senlin finds
How Cleopatra and Senebtisi
Were dug by many hands from ancient tombs . . .
Cloth after scented cloth the sage unwinds:
Delicious, to see our futile modern sunlight
Dance like a harlot among those Times and Dooms!

First, the huge pyramid, with rock on rock
Bloodily piled to heaven; and under this
A deep-dug cavern, bat-festooned;
And here in rows on rows, with gods about them,
Cloudily lustrous, dim, the sacred coffins,
Silver-starred and crimson-mooned.

What holy secret shall we now uncover?
Inside the outer coffin is a second,
Inside the second, smaller, lies a third.
This one is carved, and like a human body;
And painted over with fish and bull and bird . . .
Here are men walking stiffly in procession,
Blowing horns or lifting spears;

The Charnel Rose

Where do they march to? Where do they come from?
Soft whine of horns is in our ears . . .

Inside the third, a fourth . . . and this the artist,—
A priest, perhaps?—did most to make resemble
The flesh of her who lies within.
The brown eyes widely stare at the bat-hung ceiling.
The hair is black, the mouth is thin.

Princess! Secret of life! We come to praise you . . .
The torch is lowered, this coffin too we open,
And the dark air is sweet with musk and myrrh . . .
Here are the thousand white and scented wrappings,
The gilded face and jewelled eyes of her . . .

And now the body itself, brown, gaunt, and ugly,
And the hollow skull, in which the brains are withered,
Lie bare before us. Princess, is this all? . . .
Something there was we asked that is not answered. . .
Soft bats, in rows, hang on the lustred wall . . .

And all we hear is a sound of ghostly music,
Of brass horns dustily raised and briefly blown,
And a cry of grief, and men in a stiff procession
Marching away and softly gone.

Senlin: A Biography

VII.

'And am I, then, a pyramid?' says Senlin . . .
'In which are caves and coffins, where lies hidden
Some old and mocking hieroglyph of flesh? . . .
Or am I rather the moonlight, spreading subtly
Above those stones and times a silver mesh? . . .
Or the dark blade of grass that bravely grows
Between two massive boulders of black basalt
Year after year, and blows and fades and blows?'

Senlin, sitting before us in the lamplight,
Laughs and lights his pipe. The yellow flame
Minutely flares in his eyes, minutely dwindles . . .
Does a blade of grass have Senlin for a name? . . .
Yet we would say that we have seen him somewhere,
A tiny spear of green beneath the blue,
Playing his destiny in a sun-warmed crevice
With the gigantic fates of frost and dew.

Does a spider come and spin his gossamer ladder,
Rung by silver rung,
Chaining it fast to Senlin? Its faint shadow
Flung, waveringly, where his is flung?

The Charnel Rose

Does a raindrop dazzle starlike down his length
Trying his futile strength?
A snowflake startle him? The stars defeat him?
Through æons of dusk have birds above him sung?

Time is a wind, says Senlin; time, like music
Blows over us its mournful beauty, passes,
And leaves behind a shadow recollection,—
A helpless gesture of mist above the grasses.

Senlin: A Biography

VIII.

In the cold blue lucid dusk before the sunrise,
One yellow star sings over a peak of snow,
And melts and vanishes in a light like roses . . .
Through slanting mist black rocks appear and glow.

The clouds flow downward, slowly as grey glaciers,
Or up to pale rose-azure pass.
The blue streams tinkle down from snow to boulders,
From boulders to white grass.

Icicles on the pine tree melt
And softly flash in the sun:
In long straight lines the star-drops fall
One by one.

Is a voice heard while the shadows still are long,
Borne slowly down on the sparkled air?
Is a thin bell heard from the peak of silence?
Is someone among the high snows there? . . .

The Charnel Rose

Where the blue stream flows coldly among the
meadows
And mist still clings to rock and tree
Senlin walks alone; and from that twilight
Looks darkly up, to see

The calm unmoving peak of snow-white silence,
The rocks aflame with ice, the rose-blue sky . . .
Ghost-like, a cloud descends from twinkling ledges,
To nod before the dwindling sun and die.

'Something there is,' says Senlin, 'in that mountain,
Something forgotten now, that once I knew . . .'
We walk before a sun-tipped peak in silence,
Our shadows descend before us, long and blue.

Senlin: A Biography

II. His Futile Preoccupations

I.

'I am a house,' says Senlin, 'locked and darkened,
Sealed from the sun with wall and door and blind.
Summon me loudly and you'll hear slow footsteps
Ring far and faint in the galleries of my mind.
You'll hear soft steps on an old and dusty stairway;
Peer darkly through some corner of a pane
You'll see me with a faint light coming slowly,
Pausing above some balcony of the brain . . .

I am a city . . . In the blue light of evening
Wind wanders among my streets and makes them fair;
I am a desolate room . . . a maiden dances
Lifting her pale hands, tossing her golden hair . . .
She combs her hair, the bare white room is darkened,
She extends herself in me, and I am sleep.
It is my pride that starlight is above me,
I dream amid waves of air, my walls are deep.

I am a door . . . before me roils the darkness,
Behind me ring clear waves of sound and light.
Stand in the shadowy street outside, and listen—
The crying of violins assails the night . . .

The Charnel Rose

My walls are deep, but the cries of music pierce them;
They shake with the sound of drums . . . yet it is
strange
That I should know so little what means this music,
Hearing it always within me change and change.

Knock on the door,—and you shall have an answer!
Open the heavy walls to set me free,
And blow a horn to call me into the sunlight,—
And startled then what a strange thing you shall see!
Nuns, murderers, and drunkards, saints and sinners,
Lover and dancing girl and sage and clown
Will laugh upon you, and you will find me nowhere...
I am a room, a house, a street, a town.

Senlin: A Biography

II.

It is morning, Senlin says, and in the morning
When the light drips through the shutters like the dew,
I arise, I face the sunrise,
And do the things my fathers learned to do.
Stars in the purple dusk above the rooftops
Pale in a saffron mist and seem to die,
And I myself on a swiftly tilting planet
Stand before a glass and tie my tie.

Vine leaves tap my window,
Dew-drops sing to the garden stones,
The robin chirps in the chinaberry tree
Repeating three clear tones.

It is morning. I stand by the mirror
And tie my tie once more.
While waves far off in a pale rose twilight
Crash on a white sand shore.
I stand by a mirror and comb my hair:
How small and white my face!—
The green earth tilts through a sphere of air
And bathes in a flame of space.

The Charnel Rose

There are houses hanging above the stars
And stars hung under a sea . . .
And a sun far off in a shell of silence
Dapples my walls for me . . .

It is morning, Senlin says, and in the morning
Should I not pause in the light to remember god?
Upright and firm I stand on a star unstable,
He is immense and lonely as a cloud.
I will dedicate this moment before my mirror
To him alone, for him I will comb my hair.
Accept these humble offerings, cloud of silence!
I will think of you as I descend the stair.

Vine leaves tap my window,
The snail-track shines on the stones,
Dew-drops flash from the chinaberry tree
Repeating two clear tones.

It is morning, I awake from a bed of silence,
Shining I rise from the starless waters of sleep.
The walls are about me still as in the evening,
I am the same, and the same name still I keep.

Senlin: A Biography

The earth revolves with me, yet makes no motion,
The stars pale silently in a coral sky.
In a whistling void I stand before my mirror,
Unconcerned, and tie my tie.

There are horses neighing on far-off hills
Tossing their long white manes,
And mountains flash in the rose-white dusk,
Their shoulders black with rains . . .
It is morning. I stand by the mirror
And surprise my soul once more;
The blue air rushes above my ceiling,
There are suns beneath my floor . . .

. . . It is morning, Senlin says, I ascend from darkness
And depart on the winds of space for I know not where,
My watch is wound, a key is in my pocket,
And the sky is darkened as I descend the stair.
There are shadows across the windows, clouds in heaven,
And a god among the stars; and I will go
Thinking of him as I might think of daybreak
And humming a tune I know . . .

The Charnel Rose

Vine-leaves tap at the window,
Dew-drops sing to the garden stones,
The robin chirps in the chinaberry tree
Repeating three clear tones.

Senlin: A Biography

III.

I walk to my work, says Senlin, along a street
Superbly hung in space.
I lift these mortal stones, and with my trowel
I tap them into place . . .
But is god, perhaps, a giant who ties his tie
Grimacing before a colossal glass of sky?

These stones are heavy, these stones decay,
These stones are wet with rain,
I build them into a wall to-day,
To-morrow they fall again . . .

Does god arise from a chaos of starless sleep,
Rise from the dark and stretch his arms and yawn;
And drowsily look from the window at his garden;
And rejoice at the dewdrops sparkling on his lawn?
Does he remember, suddenly, with amazement,
The yesterday he left in sleep,—his name,—
Or the glittering street superbly hung in wind
Along which in the dusk he slowly came? . . .

The Charnel Rose

I devise new patterns for laying stones
And build a stronger wall.
One drop of rain astonishes me
And I let my trowel fall.

The flashing of leaves delights my eyes,
Blue air delights my face;
I will dedicate this stone to god
As I tap it into its place.

Senlin: A Biography

IV.

That woman—did she try to attract my attention?
Is it true I saw her smile and nod?
She turned her head and smiled . . . was it for me?
It is better to think of work or god.

The clouds pile coldly above the houses,
Slow wind revolves in the leaves:
It begins to rain, and the first long drops
Are slantingly blown from eaves.

But it is true she tried to attract my attention!
She pressed a rose to her chin and smiled.
Her hand was white by the richness of her hair,
Her eyes were those of a child.
It is true she looked at me as if she liked me,
And turned away, afraid to look too long! . . .
She watched me out of the corners of her eyes;
And, tapping time with fingers, hummed a song . . .

. . . Nevertheless, I will think of work,
With a trowel in my hands;
Or the vague god who blows like clouds
Above these dripping lands . . .

But . . . is it sure she tried to attract my attention? . . .
She leaned her elbow in a peculiar way
There in the crowded room . . . she touched my hand . . .
She must have known it, and yet,—she let it stay . . .
Music of flesh! Music of root and sod!
Leaf touching leaf in the wind and the rain! . . .
Impalpable clouds of red ascend,
Red clouds blow over my brain.

Did she await from me some sign of acceptance? . . .
I smoothed my hair with a faltering hand.
I started a feeble smile, but the smile was frozen:
Perhaps, I thought, I misunderstand . . .
Is it to be conceived that I could attract her—
This dull and futile flesh attract such fire?
I,—with a trowel's dulness in hand and brain!—
Take on some godlike aspect, rouse desire? . . .

Incredible! . . . delicious! . . . I will wear
A brighter color of tie, arranged with care;
I will delight in god as I comb my hair . . .

And the conquests of my bolder past return
Like strains of music, weaving some old tune
Recalled from youth and a happier time.
I take my sweetheart's arm in the dusk once more;
Once more we laugh, and hold our breath, and climb

Up the forbidden stairway, floor by floor,
Under the flickering lights, along old railings:
I catch her hand in the dark, we laugh once more,
I hear the rustle of silk, and follow swiftly,
And softly at last we close the door . . .

Yes, it is true that woman tried to attract me:
It is true she came out of time for me,
Came from the swirling and savage forests of earth,
The cruel eternity of the sea.
She parted the leaves of waves and rose from the silence
Shining with secrets she did not know.
Music of dust! Music of web and web!
And I, bewildered, let her go . . .

I light my pipe. The flame is yellow,
Edged underneath with blue.
These thoughts are truer of god, perhaps,
Than thoughts of god are true.

v.

It is noontime, Senlin says, and a street piano
Strikes sharply against the sunshine a harsh chord,
And the universe is suddenly agitated,
And pain to my heart goes glittering like a sword.
Do I imagine it? The dust is shaken,
The sunlight quivers, the brittle oak-leaves tremble...
The world, disturbed, conceals its agitation;
And I, too, will dissemble . . .

Yet it is sorrow has found my heart,
Sorrow for beauty, sorrow for death,
And pain twirls slowly among the trees
And falls like a languid breath.

The street-piano revolves its glittering music,
The sharp notes flash and dazzle and turn.
Memory's knives are in this sunlit silence;
They ripple and twinkle and lazily burn . . .
The star on which my shadow falls is frightened,
It does not move; my trowel taps a stone,
The sweet note wavers amid derisive music,
And I, in a horror of sunlight, stand alone.

Senlin: A Biography

Do not recall my weakness, savage music!
Let the knives rest! . . .
Impersonal, harsh, the music revolves and glitters,
And the notes like poinards pierce my breast.
The leaves on the bush are shrivelled and shaken and
torn,
The dust is vibrant, the frayed leaves fall;
And I alone in a streaming silence of sunlight
Wait among shafts of sorrow, and recall

The face of a friend forgotten, the hands of children,
Leaves on a morning of frost, the bewildered cry
Of a girl who walked in the cool green dawn of beauty
And learned she had to die . . .
And I remember the shadows of webs on stones,
And the sound of rain on tired grass,
And a sorrowful face that looked without illusions
At its image in the glass . . .

Do not recall my childhood, pitiless music!
The green blades flicker and gleam,
The red bee bends the clover, deeply humming,
In the blue sea above me lazily stream

The Charnel Rose

Cloud upon thin-blown cloud, revolving, scattering,
The mulberry trees rake heaven and drop their fruit,
Amazing sunlight sings in the opened vault
On dust and bones and webs; and I am mute.

It is noon; the bells let fall soft flowers of sound.
They turn on the air, they shrink in the flare of noon.
It is night, and I lie alone, and watch through the window
The terrible ice-white emptiness of the moon.
Small bells, far off, spill jewels of sound like rain,
A long wind hurries them whirled and far,
A cloud creeps over the moon, my bed is darkened,
I hold my breath and watch a star.

Do not disturb my memories, heartless music!
I stand once more by a vine-dark moonlit wall,
The sound of my footsteps dies in a void of moonlight,
And I watch white roses softly fall.
Is it my heart that falls? Does earth itself
Drift, a white petal, silently down the sky?
One bell-note goes to the stars in the blue-white silence,
Solitary and mournful, a somnolent cry.

Senlin: A Biography

VI.

Death himself in the rain . . . death himself . . .
Death in the savage sunlight . . . skeletal death . . .
I hear the clack of his feet,
Clearly on stones, softly in dust,
Speeding among the trees with whistling breath,
Whirling the leaves, tossing his hands from waves . . .
Listen! the immortal footsteps beat and beat! . . .

Death himself in the grass, death himself,
Gyrating invisibly in the sun,
Scattering grass-blades, whipping the wind,
Tearing at boughs with malignant laughter . . .
On the long echoing air I hear him run!

Death himself in the dusk, gathering lilacs,
Breaking a white-fleshed bough,
Strewing the purple spikes on a cobwebbed lawn,
Dancing, dancing,
Drunk with excess, the long red sun-rays glancing
On flourishing arms, skipping with hideous knees,
Cavorting his grotesque ecstasies . . .
I do not see him, but I see the lilacs fall,

The Charnel Rose

I hear the scrape of his hands against the wall,
The leaves are tossed and tremble where he plunges among them,
And silence falls, and I hear the sound of his breath,
Sharp and whistling, the rhythm of death.

It is evening: the lights on a long street balance and sway.
In the purple ether they swing and silently sing,
The street is a gossamer swung in space
And death himself in the wind comes dancing along it,
And the lights, like raindrops, fall and tremble and swing . . .
Hurry, spider, and spread your glistening web,
For death approaches!
Hurry, rose, and open your heart to the bee,
For death approaches!
Maiden, let down your hair for the hands of your lover,
Comb it with moonlight and wreathe it with leaves,
For death approaches! . . .

Death, colossal in stars, minute in the sand-grain,
Death himself in the rain, death himself,

Senlin: A Biography

Drawing the rain about him like a garment of
jewels . . .
I hear the sound of his feet
On the stairs of the wind, in the sun,
In the forests of the sea . . .
Listen! the immortal footsteps beat and beat!

VII.

It is noontime, Senlin says. The sky is brilliant
Above a green and dreaming hill.
I lay my trowel down. The pool is cloudless,
The grass, the wall, the peach-tree, all are still . . .
It appears to me that I am one with these:
A hill, upon whose back are a wall and trees.

It is noontime: all seems still
Upon this green and flowering hill.

Yet suddenly, out of nowhere in the sky,
A cloud comes whirling, and flings
A lazily coiling vortex of shade on the hill . . .
It crosses the hill, and a bird in the peach-tree sings.
Amazing! . . . Is there a change? . . .
The hill seems somehow strange.

It is noontime. And in the tree
The leaves are delicately disturbed
Where the bird descends invisibly.
It is noontime. And in the pool
The sky is blue and cool.

Yet suddenly, out of nowhere in the wind,
Something ferociously flings itself at the hill,
Tears with claws at the earth, whirrs amid shadows,
Roars from the grass, rages among the trees,
Lunges and hisses and softly recoils,
Crashing against the green like inaudible seas! . . .
The peach-tree braces itself, the pool is frightened,
The grass blades quiver, the bird is still,
The wall seems silently struggling against the sunlight,
Some apprehension stiffens the hill . . .
And the trees turn rigidly, to face
Something that circles with slow pace:
And the blue pool seems to shrink
From something that slides above its brink . . .
What struggle is this, ferocious and slow and still?
What is it that wars in the sunlight on this hill? . . .
What is it that creeps to dart
Like a knife-blade at my heart? . . .

It is noontime, Senlin says, and all is tranquil . . .
The brilliant sky burns over a green-bright earth.
The peach-tree dreams in the sun, the wall is contented.

And a bird in the peach-leaves, moving from sun to
shadow,
Phrases again his unremembering mirth,
His lazily beautiful, foolish, mechanical mirth.

VIII.

The pale blue gloom of evening comes
Among the quiet of forests and walls
With a mournful and rhythmic sound of drums.
My heart is disturbed with a sound of myriad throbbing,
Persuasive and sinister, near and far:
In the blue evening of my heart
I hear the thrum of the evening star.

My work is uncompleted; and yet I hurry,—
Hearing the whispered pulsing of those drums,—
To enter the luminous walls and woods of night . . .
It is the eternal mistress of the world
Who shakes these drums for my delight . . .
Listen! the drums of the leaves, the drums of the dust,
The delicious quivering of this air!
The eternal mistress is laughing among the stars,
Yawning in silver amid her hair . . .
I will leave my work unfinished, and I will go
With ringing and certain step through the laughter of chaos
To the one small room in the void I know . . .
Yesterday it was there,—

The Charnel Rose

Will I find it to-night once more when I climb the
stair? . . .
Will she remember me—will she greet me,
And touch my heart with a cool white hand?
Will music crash like a wave about me
As I see her rise and stand,
Solitary and fragrant against the night,
A single lilac tree in a whirl of light? . . .

The drums of the street run low and far:
In the blue evening of my heart
I hear the thrum of the evening star . . .
And a thousand images recur
Weaving deliciously in my brain
A tyrannous melody of her:
Hands in the sunlight, threads of the rain
Against her glistening lamplit face,
Snow on a cold black window-pane,
And tears in a leafy place . . .
Stars in a dusk of hair entangled;
And flesh more delicate than fruit;
And a voice that searches among my veins
For a chord to throb and mute . . .

Senlin: A Biography

My life is uncompleted: and so I hurry,
Among the tinkling forests and walls of evening
To a certain fragrant room.
Who is it that dances there, to a beating of drums,
While stars on a grey sea bud and bloom?
Who is it that lifts her hands in the yellow light
Turning a dazzle of shoulders against the night?
She stands at the top of the stair,
With the lamplight on her hair . . .
I will walk through the snarling of streams of space,
And climb the long steps carved from wind
And rise once more towards her face . . .
Listen! the drums of the drowsy trees,
And the mournful drums of seas!

And out of the evening like a rose
The evenings of my past unfold;
Rain and lilacs, silver and white,
Evenings of stars, purple and gold . . .
Music spins from the heart of silence
And twirls me softly upon the air . . .
It comes from a far-off luminous room
And dark star-tangled hair.

The Charnel Rose

It takes my hand and whispers to me
The melodious mystery of flesh,
It draws the web of the moonlight down
And spins for my heart a mesh.
There are hands, it says, as cool as snow,
The hands of the Venus of the sea,
There are waves of sound in a mermaid-cave,—
Come—then—come with me!
Softness and whiteness, cool and sweet,
The flesh of the sea-rose, new and cool,
The wavering image of her who comes
At dusk by a blue sea-pool . . .
Whispers upon the starlit air,
Whispers of foam-white arm and thigh,
And a shower of delicate stars blown down
From the silent sky! . . .
Music spins from a far-off room . . .
Do you remember,—it seems to say,—
The mouth that smiled, beneath your mouth,
And kissed you . . . yesterday?
It is your own flesh waits for you,
Come! you are incomplete! . . .
The drums of the universe once more
Morosely beat and beat.

Senlin: A Biography

The drum of the white star thrills the sky,
The drum of the moon beats slow and dull:
It is death himself who wearily knocks
A tom-tom on a silvered skull.
It is the harlot of the world
Who clashes the leaves like ghostly drums
And disturbs the solitude of my heart
As evening comes!

I leave my work once more, and walk
Along a street that sways in the wind . . .
Among great trees that grope in space
I search for a woman's face.

Once more in the evening I let fall
The thoughts I builded into a wall.
I leave these stones, and walk once more
Along infinity's shore.

I climb the golden-laddered stair;
Among the stars in the blue I climb:
I ascend the golden-laddered hair
Of the harlot-queen of time:

The Charnel Rose

She laughs from a window in the sky,
Her white arms downward reach to me! . . .
We are the universe that spins
In a dim ethereal sea.

IX.

It is evening, Senlin says, and in the evening
The throbbing of drums has languidly died away.
The forests and seas are still. We breathe in silence
And strive to say the things flesh cannot say.
The soulless wind falls slowly about the earth
And finds no rest.
The lover stares at the stars,—the wakeful lover
Who finds no peace on his lover's breast.
The snare of flesh that bound us in is broken;
Softly, in sorrow, we draw apart, and see,
Far off, the beauty we thought our flesh had captured,—
The star flesh longed to be but could not be . . .
Clouds blow over us. Rain serenely falls.
Rain in the shaken lamplight, rain on the roof.
Once more, about us, darken our finite walls . . .
Come back! . . . We will laugh once more at the words we said . . .
We say them slowly again, but the words are dead . . .
Come back, beloved! . . . The blue void whirls between,
We cry to each other: alone, unknown, unseen.

The Charnel Rose

We are the grains of sand that run and rustle
In the wind among old dunes.
We are the grains of sand who thought ourselves
Immortal moons.
You touch my hand, time bears you softly away,—
An alien star for whom I have no word . . .
What are the strange and meaningless things you
say? . . .
I answer you, but am not heard.

It is evening, Senlin says; and the darkness crumbles;
And a dream in ruins falls.
Once more we turn in a silent pain, bewildered,
Among our finite walls:
The walls we built ourselves with patient hands
For a god who sealed a question in our flesh:
Obeying a god's commands.

Senlin: A Biography

x.

It is moonlight. Alone in the silence
I ascend my stairs once more,
While waves, remote in a pale blue starlight,
Crash on a white sand shore.
It is moonlight. The garden is silent.
I stand in my room alone.
Across my wall, from the far-off moon,
A rain of fire is thrown . . .

There are houses hanging above the stars,
And stars hung under a sea:
And a wind from the long blue vault of time
Waves my curtains for me . . .

I wait in the dark once more,
Swung between space and space:
Before my mirror I lift my hands
And face my remembered face.
Is it I who stand in a question here,
Asking to know my name? . . .
It is I, yet I know not whither I go,
Nor why, nor whence I came.

The Charnel Rose

It is I, who awoke at dawn
And arose and descended the stair,
Conceiving a god in the eye of the sun,—
In a woman's hands and hair.
It is I whose flesh is grey with the stones
I builded into a wall:
With a mournful melody in my brain
Of a tune I cannot recall . . .

There are roses to kiss: and mouths to kiss;
And the sharp-pained shadow of death.
I remember a rain-drop on my cheek,—
A wind like a fragrant breath . . .
And the star I laugh on tilts through heaven;
And the heavens are dark and steep . . .
I will forget these things once more
In the silence of sleep.

Senlin: A Biography

III. His Cloudy Destiny

I.

Senlin sat before us and we heard him.
He smoked his pipe before us and we saw him.
Was he small, with reddish hair,
Did he light his pipe with a meditative stare
And a twinkling flame reflected in blue eyes?
Was he sad and happy and foolish and wise?
'I am alone:' said Senlin, 'in a forest of leaves
The single leaf that creeps and greens and falls . . .
The single blade of grass in a desert of grasses
That none foresaw and none recalls.
The single shell that a green wave flings and shatters
In tiny specks of whiteness on the sands . . .
How shall you understand me with your hearts,
Who cannot find me with your hands? . . .'

The city dissolves about us, and its walls
Are the sands beside a sea.
We plunge in a chaos of dunes, white waves before us
Crash on the weeds tumultuously.
Gulls wheel over the foam, the clouds blow swiftly,
The sun is swallowed . . . Has Senlin become a shore?

The Charnel Rose

Is Senlin a grain of sand beneath our footsteps,
A speck of shell upon which waves will roar? . . .
Senlin! we cry . . . Senlin! again . . . no answer,
Only the crash of sea on a shell-white floor . . .

Yet, we would say, this is no shore at all,
But a small bright room with lamplight on the wall;
And the familiar chair
Where Senlin sat, with the lamplight on his hair.

Senlin: A Biography

II.

Senlin, alone before us, played a music . . .
Was it himself he played? . . . We sat and listened,
Perplexed and pleased and tired.
'Listen!' he said, 'and you shall learn a secret—
Though it is not the music you desired.
I have not found a music that will praise you! . . .
Out of the heart of silence comes this music,
Quietly sings and quietly dies.
Look! there is one white star above black houses!
And a tiny man who climbs towards far skies!
Where does he walk to? What does he leave behind
him?
What was his foolish name?
What did he stop to say, before he left you
As darkly as he came? . . .
"Death?" did it sound like, "love, and god, and
laughter,
Sunlight, and work, and pain . . . ?"
No—it appears to me that these were symbols
Of things he found no words to explain.
He spoke, but found you could not understand him—
You were alone, and he was alone.
His words were whirled and lost in a raging chaos,

On a laughter of wind his tunes were blown . . .
He sought to touch you, and found he could not reach
you,—
Flesh was between; and the walls of time and space.
He sought to understand you, and could not hear you.
He sought to know you, but only saw your face . . .
And so this music, which I play before you,
Does it mean only what it seems to mean?
Or is it a dance of foolish waves in sunlight
Above a desperate depth of things unseen? . . .
Listen! Do you not hear the singing of mermaids
Out of the darkness of this sea? . . .
But no: you cannot hear them; for if you heard them
You would have heard and captured me.
Yet I am here, talking of hands and roses,
Laughter and love and work and god;
As I shall talk of these same things hereafter
In wind and wave and grey-webbed sod.
Walk on a hill and call me: "Senlin! . . . Senlin! . . . "
Will I not answer you as clearly as now?
Listen to rain, and you will hear me speaking.
Look for my heart in the breaking of a bough . . .'

Senlin: A Biography

III.

Senlin stood before us in the sunlight,
And laughed, and walked away.
Did no one see him leaving the doors of the city,
Looking behind him as if he wished to stay? . . .
Has no one, in the forests of the evening,
Heard the sad horn of Senlin slowly blown?
For somewhere in the worlds-in-worlds around us
He wanders still, unfriended and alone.
Is he the star on which we walk at daybreak,
The light that blinds our eyes?
'Senlin!' we cry. 'Senlin!' again . . . no answer . . .
Only the soulless brilliance of blue skies . . .

Yet we would say, this was no man at all,
But a dream we dreamed and vividly recall;
And we are mad to walk in wind and rain
Hoping to find, somewhere, that dream again.

VARIATIONS

[1916]

VARIATIONS

I.

The moon distills a soft blue light,
The moon distills a silence.
Black clouds huddle across the stars;
I walk in deserted gardens
Breaking the dry leaves under my feet . . .
Leaves have littered the marble seat
Where the lovers sat in silence . . .
Leaves have littered the empty seat . . .

Down there the black pool, quiveringly,
Ripples the floating moon . . .
Down there the tall trees, restlessly,
Shake beneath the moon . . .
Beloved, I walk alone . . .
What ghost is this that walks with me,
Always in darkness walks with me?

II.

Green light, from the moon,
Pours over the dark blue trees,
Green light from the autumn moon
Pours on the grass . . .
Green light falls on the goblin fountain
Where hesitant lovers meet and pass.

They laugh in the moonlight, touching hands,
They move like leaves on the wind . . .
I remember an autumn night like this,
And not so long ago,
When other lovers were blown like leaves,
Before the coming of snow.

Variations

III.

Wind in the sunlit trees, and the red leaves fall:
Shadows of leaves on the sunlit wall.
Wind in the turning tops of the trees . . .
I am reminded, seeing these,
Of an afternoon, and you
Making the trees more scarlet, the sky more blue.

The Charnel Rose

IV.

Here alone, unknown, in the darkness,
I watch you whirling above your shadow,
Soft in saffron, with dark hair jewelled,
And arms uplifted,

Dancing alone in the hissing spotlight . . .
You rise and fall on the wave of the music
Narrowing eyes at the light that dazzles,
Languidly smiling . . .

Beautiful, now, are your cold white shoulders . . .
If I were death, my hands might touch them;
If I were death my mouth might kiss you,
Passionate dancer.

Variations

v.

From the cold fountain's sunlit lip
A shining film of water spreads,
It is shot with sun, it is blue and gold . . .
It scatters jewels to wet the grass,
And children watch it with lifted heads,
And the young girls pause there as they pass . . .
A sparrow sits at the edge, and flings
The vanishing jewels with his wings.

VI.

You are as beautiful as white clouds
Flowing among bright stars at night:
You are as beautiful as pale clouds
Which the moon sets alight.

You are as lovely as golden stars
Which white clouds try to brush away:
You are as bright as golden stars
When they come out to play.

You are as glittering as those stairs
Of stone down which the blue brooks run:
You are as shining as sea-waves
All hastening to the sun.

Variations

VII.

Red leaf, red leaf, falling to float
On the blue water among the cold clouds . . .
If I were a child I would call you a boat
And sail to the moon . . .

I would sail to the moon with the dark king's daughter,
The beautiful dreamer with green-slippered feet;
Her long golden hair would shine on the water;
Her eyes would be blue;

And there she would sing, while the sail overhead
Swelled with the wind, and the green waves flashed,—
Her red lips would sing, till the isle of the dead
Rose darkly before us.

VIII.

In the mazes of loitering people, the watchful and furtive,
The shadows of tree-trunks and shadows of leaves,
In the drowse of the sunlight, among the low voices,
I suddenly face you,

Your dark eyes return for a space from her who is with you,
They shine into mine with a sunlit desire,
They say an 'I love you, what star do you live on?'
They smile and then darken,

And silent I answer 'You too—I have known you,—I love you!'—
And the shadows of tree-trunks and shadows of leaves
Interlace with low voices and footsteps and sunlight
To divide us forever.

Variations

IX.

Moonlight, and shadows of leaves
On the white wall above me—
The shadows gallop and swirl without sound.
Blue moonlight, brief shadows of leaves,
And once more I see you:
Saying aloud, like a dreamer, 'You love me,
You love me!'

Moonlight . . . down there in the garden,
I know without seeing,
The somnolent fountain is filled with blue fire.
I close my eyes, I pursue you
Through dream's fainter moonlight,
Ghostlike, with shadows of dead leaves, silently
Fleeing.

x.

Queen Cleopatra, now grown old,
Watched the green grass turning brown . . .
The river is shrunk to half its size:
Now I will lay me down.

Queen Cleopatra called her slaves
And peered in the mirror with age-pearled eyes;
My lips are not so red as they were:
Not so the old leaf dies!

Light the torches, and fill the courts
With scarlet music, and bring to me
Vermilion to smear upon my lips,
And opals, that I may be

Once more what Cleopatra was
Before the woman became the queen . . .
She laughed, and backward tossed her head;
And horn, and tambourine,

Snarled at the hot and red-starred night,
While gasping dancers, one by one,
Whirled on the stone with yellow feet . . .
And when that dance was done

Variations

She poured cold poison into a cup
And watched the thick foam wink and seethe:
One black bubble upon her tongue
And she would cease to breathe.

She held the poison before her mouth . . .
And saw the dark tomb hewed in stone
Where a thousand nights would drift as one,
And she would sleep alone;

And lightly touched the goblet's rim,
And thought, with a pleased and narrowed eye,
Of this and that, and Antony,
And the laugh that will not die.

XI.

This night I dreamed that you shone before me
Colder and paler than rose-flushed marble,
With dark hair fallen across your shoulders
And face half hidden.

And in that darkness I went before you
And turned my eyes from your beauty quickly:
I turned away from your too great beauty,
I fled before you.

Now I remember how in that shadow
You started to smile, your dark eyes kindled,
Your face grew light with a word unspoken;
Then, had I waited,

I should have learned . . . what moonlight secret?
What whisper of temples and hills of cypress?
What echo of singing and far-off cymbals,
Gleam of the goddess? . . .

But I, grown base in fear of denial,
Though all my blood stood still for your beauty,
I turned in silence away from your kindness;
And now I have lost you.

Variations

XII.

Wind, wind, wind in the old trees,
Whispering prophecies all night long . . .
What do the grey leaves sing to the wind,
What do they say in their whispered song?

We were all young once, and green as the sea,
We all loved beauty, the maiden of white.
But now we are old. O wind, have mercy
And let us remember our youth this night!

The wind is persuasive, it turns through the trees
And sighs of a miracle under its breath . . .
Beauty the dream will die with the dreamer,
None shall have mercy, but all shall have death.

XIII.

Blue waves are driven by wind,
The leaves are driven,
And the clouds go hurrying dizzily over the sky.
Among the blown leaves he stands, and lifts his flute,
And trembles, and blows strange melody at the sky.
The music he plays is old blown leaves,
The notes are unevenly blown.
Sometimes it sings, sometimes it grieves,
Sometimes a querulous monotone . . .
What does he see above red rooftops,
What does he see when he lifts his eyes?
Pale leaves loosened from bare black elm-boughs,
Pale leaves hurled from the hurrying skies,
Death . . . death . . . death . . . death . . .
Beauty singing for beauty that dies.
Love was betrayed in the whispering garden:
Clear as white flame the maiden fled.
A shaft of moonlight dazzled the somnolent garden;
And among the white leaves love lay dead . . .
Pale waves are driven to foam,
And the leaves are driven;
Among the blown leaves he wavers and lifts his flute.
Dust will cover the golden leaves of the maple,
The querulous praise will soon be mute.

Variations

XIV.

Beautiful body made of ivory,
Beautiful body made of ivory and roses,
Beautiful body made of gold and beaten silver,
Garlanded with ivy,

Colder than starlight you stand and await me,
Colder than starlight on the snow of mountains;
Whiter than starlight on the snow of oceans
You wait and are silent.

Beautiful dreamer of dreams,
Beautiful dreamer of cold-hearted music,
Roseate dreamer of involuted music,
Chords of tense silver,

Clearly you sound to me in the night-time;
Solemnly, like a rich wind moving,
You move in my heart's enchanted forests,
You sigh and are restless.

Beautiful dream of the dreamer,
Rare dream profoundly and curiously unfolding,
Unfolding like a lotus in waves of cool fragrance,
Unfolding in slow measure,

The Charnel Rose

You are like moonlight prodigally unfolding,
You are like the universe of stars unfolding,
Unfolding in slow chords of sound and silence,
Grave and immortal.

Beautiful body made of roses,
Beautiful body made of roses and sea-waves,
Beautiful body with eyes of cold starlight,
Slow-moving dreamer,

Beautiful woman made of love,
White body made of dreamdust and stardust,
Silently and sedately you enter me,—
Quietly you possess me.

Variations

XV.

The sea falls all night on the yellow sand,
The green waves foam and thrust and slide,
The long green waves fall on the yellow sand,
All night long they fall,

The green waves fall and drag at the yellow pebbles,
The shingle roars in the sliding surf,
Wind screams over the long volutes of foam,
All night long they whirl,

They charge the sand and seethe and slide in laughter,
Swiftly withdraw and murmur and rise,
They charge the sand with rippling glittering edges,
All night long they charge,

Immortally flinging their long green bodies to death,
Immortally baffled, withdrawing, crying,
Rallying, hurrying, clamoring, sobbing for rest,
Immortally slaying, immortally dying.

XVI.

Against an orange twilight sky
The street lamp gleams like clearer fire,
The cold wind spills the huddling leaves,
And cold bells, in the sombre spire,
Shake the wind with a savage sound . . .
The street lamp gleams like a golden eye.

This dust will be possessed of tongues,
These leaves will find a million voices,
These stones will murmur and seize our feet,
These boughs of trees will writhe and beat . . .
Against an orange twilight sky
The street lamp burns like a golden eye.

The earth's edge, growing black, swings up
With sinister and enormous arc,
The yellow star that came to swim
Silently in the golden sky
Is caught and crushed by that black rim . . .
The street lamp gleams like an evil eye.

Variations

XVII.

Tear the pink rose petal by petal
And let the petals float and fall,
Ravel the golden stamens out,
And last of all,

Shredding its sweetness on the wind,
Turn and laugh and go away,
Forgetting how soft a thing it was,
How brief a thing to stay.

But when white winds have swept your heart
And white tides driven along your veins,
And the continents are yellow with leaves
And the mountains black with rains,

Secretly in your depths of sleep
Among the unresting rocks and roots
A dream, a gleam, a warmth will start,
A whorl of winds and lutes,

And thrusting among the withered leaves
Will burn the purple-pointed flame,
And the rose you slew will light again,
Will light again the same.

XVIII.

The sun distills a golden light,
The sun distills a silence.
White clouds dazzle across the sky:
I walk in the blowing garden
Breaking the gay leaves under my feet . . .
Leaves have littered the marble seat
Where the lovers sat in silence:
Leaves have littered the empty seat.

Down there the blue pool, quiveringly,
Ripples the fire of the sun;
Down there the tall tree, restlessly,
Shivers beneath the sun.
Beloved, I walk alone . . .
What dream is this that sings with me,
Always in sunlight sings with me?

Out there the blue sea, glimmeringly,
Ripples among the dunes.
Blue waves streaked and chained with fire
Rustle among the dunes.

Variations

The sea-gull spreads his wings
Dizzily over the foam to skim,
And an azure shadow speeds with him.
The sea-gull folds his wings
To fall from depth to depth of air
And finds sky everywhere.

THE CHARNEL ROSE

[1915]

TO G. B. W.

THE ONLY TRUE PROTAGONIST

AND R. N. L.

THE ONLY TRUE ONEIROCRITIC

THIS POEM

IS DEDICATED

PREFACE

THE CHARNEL ROSE needs, perhaps, some explanation. Like programme music, it is helped by a programme: though concrete in its imagery, it avoids sharp statements of ideas, implying the theme, rather than stating it. This theme might be called nympholepsy—nympholepsy in a broad sense as that impulse which sends us from one dream, or ideal, to another, always disillusioned, always creating for adoration some new and subtler fiction.

To exhaust such a theme would of course be impossible. One can only single out certain aspects of it, indicate with a gesture. In the present instance it has been my intention merely to use this idea as a theme upon which one might build wilfully a kind of absolute music. I have restricted myself to what was relatively a small portion of the idea—that portion which deals with the main phases of love, only departing from this theme, or group of themes, at the very end, when a transition is made into

mysticism. Thus, beginning with the lowest order of love, the merely carnal, the theme leads irregularly, with returns and anticipations as in music, through various phases of romantic or idealistic love, to several variants of sexual mysticism; finally ending, as I have said, in a mysticism apparently pure.

It scarcely needs to be said that the protagonist of the poem is not a specific man, but man in general. Man is seen seeking in many ways to satisfy his instinct to love, worshipping one idol after another, disenchanted with each in turn; and at last taking pleasure not so much in anticipation as in memory.

The Charnel Rose is called a symphony, and in some ways the analogy to a musical symphony is close. Symbols recur throughout like themes, sometimes unchanged, sometimes modified, but always referring to a definite idea. The attempt has been made to divest the successive emotions dealt with of all save the most typical or appropriate physical conditions, suggesting physical and temporal environment only so far as the mood naturally predicates it. Emotions, perceptions,—the image-stream in the mind which we call consciousness,—these hold the stage.

THE CHARNEL ROSE

THE CHARNEL ROSE

A Symphony

PART I.

And now great earth, having a long while rested,
And having all her winter in silence lain,
Forgetting the summer of leaves that she had divested,
And the roses she put away from her without pain,—
Opened her sleepy eyes to the sun again,
And turned to the stealing light, and forgot past death,
Drawing an ever-deepening tranquil breath;

And listened, amused, to the voices in her shadow,
The million little voices that babbled as one . . .
Under this great and ever-enduring meadow
She heard great fires, she heard low waters run,
And a confused vast murmur about the sun.
And then, with her somnolent white lovely hands
She lifted up from the loam, and the watery sands,

The Charnel Rose

Irises gleaming, and roses conceived anew,
And the pale little leaves that gave her tender mirth,
And fledgling birds that now for the first time flew;
(O infinitely varied and pathetic birth;)
And an innocent laughter these things were for earth,
These shining petals, these songs, these vain brave wings,
Brave souls so sure of a triumph against all things . . .

And stretching her arms above her towards the sun
She showed him these, and laughed; and hardly heard
How terror whispered among them, when day was done,
And how the darkness silenced the song of a bird . . .
For when the sun withdrew she lay, nor stirred,
But closed her eyes, and dreamed; nor heeded the crying
Of the numberless querulous voices of summer's dying.

And darkness came back, and the frightened voices were still;
And the lifted leaves were dropped; and the lifted faces
That shone for a moment with passion to love or kill,

Went down with the leaves, relinquished their dark-
ened places,
Dreaming of times to come, and sunnier spaces . . .
And earth, oblivious of all these troubles, slept;
And, waking, of all these dreams no memory kept.

I.

She rose in the moonlight, and stood, confronting sea,
With her bare arms uplifted in pale fire,
And lifted her voice in the silence foolishly:
And her face was small, and her voice was small.
'O moon!' she said, 'I think how you must tire
Forever circling earth, so silently;
Earth, who is dark and makes you no reply.'
But the moon said nothing, no word at all,
She only heard the little waves rush and fall;
And saw the moon go quietly down the sky.

She walked in the moonlight, blown by a little wind,
And felt the white dress flurry about her knees.
And she heard her woman's voice rise ghostly and
thinned,
Over the lulling seethe of spreading foam,

Saying 'O numberless waters, I think it strange
How you can always shadow her face, and change
And yet never weary of her, having no ease.'
But the sea said nothing, no word to her,
Unquietly, as in sleep, she saw it stir;
And the moon spread a net of silver over the foam.

She lifted her hands and let them fall again,
Impatient of the silence. And in despair,
Hopeless of final answer against her pain,
She said, to the stealthy air,
'O air, you travel far, from the stars are blown,
Float pollen of suns. You are an unseen sea
Lifting and bearing the moons, eternally.
O air, do you not weary of your task? . . .'
—She stood in the silence, frightened and alone,
And heard her little syllables ask and ask . . .

And then, as she walked in moonlight, so alone,
Lost and afloat and small in a soulless sea,
Hearing no voice make answer to her own,
From that infinity,—
Suddenly she was aware of a low whisper,

A dreadful heartless sound; and she stood still,—
There in the moonlit grass, on a sandy hill,—
And heard the stars, making a ghostly whisper;
And the soulless whisper of sun and moon and tree;
And the sea, rising and falling with a blind moan.

And as she faded into the darkness, into the night,
A glimmer of white,
With her arms uplifted and her face bowed down;
Lost, like a breath, in the quietness of air,
Lost, with her pale arms and her lustrous hair,
Sinking, unseen, into the sleep of the sands,
The sea-sands white and brown;
Or among the sea-grass mingling as one more blade,
Pushing before her face her silent hands;
Or sliding, stealthy as foam, in to the sea,
With a slow seethe and melting, soon to fade:

Too late to find her, yet not too late to see,
Came he, who sought forever unsatisfied,
And saw her open and enter and shut the darkness,
Desired and fleet,
And after her ran, and through the darkness cried,

And caught at the rays of the moon, yet found but
darkness,
Caught at the shine of her feet, to fill his hands
With the sleepy blink of sands:
He that desired to snare her fugitive feet.

'O moon!' he said: 'was it you I followed after,
You who put silver madness into my eyes?—'
But he only heard, in the dark, a stifled laughter,
And the rattle of dead leaves blowing;
And over his body felt a hoarse wind flowing,
Cold with the desolate emptiness of the skies.

And a golden star slipped quietly down the heavens,
Down the smooth blackness; and was forever lost,
Taking the years with it, and æons of years,
Ravels of night, and the myriad leaves of tears.
And still his hands were raised, and his little words
tossed
On the gleaming waves of the wind, ripples of air.
And the whisper of suns made mock of his despair.

'O wind!—' he said—'was it you I followed after,
And your cool hand I felt against my face?—'

But he only heard, in the dark, a stifled laughter,
And shadows crept past him, each with furtive pace,
Breathing cold night upon him. And one by one
The ghosts of leaves blew past him, seeking the sun.
And a golden star slipped silently down the heavens,
Down the smooth wall of night, forever dead,
Taking the years with it; and there by the sea,
He sat in a world of sand, and bowed his head,
And dreamed of the dream he saw among the shadows,
And followed her through his dreams, despairingly.

And the world he dreamed of grew like fire,
Fed on a starred wind of desire;
And music broke and pierced it through,
With moons of gold and rents of blue;
And forever upon it went and came
Unsteady motes as bright as flame,
Upward and downward softly blown,
Or steadfast on a waft of tone.

And he sought the holiness of her face
From star to star and space to space,
Following music down the air
To find, perhaps, her streaming hair;

Or plunging up through moonless skies
To find, through light at length, her eyes.

'O foam!' he said—'was it you I followed after,
And your white feet that tossed before my own?—'
But he only heard, in the dark, a stifled laughter,
And the slow hush of sea;
And the flurry of leaves being rushed upon and blown
Above him there in the moonlit poplar tree.

And a silent star slipped golden down the darkness,
Down the great sleep, leaving no trace in sky,
And years went with it, and worlds. And he dreamed still
Of a fleeter shadow among the shadows running,
Foam into foam, without a gesture or cry,
Leaving him there, alone, on a sandy hill.

II.

Now one by one the stars came down
Into the silence of the town;
Each took alone his destined place;
And walking swift he saw a face

The Charnel Rose

Luminous for one moment there,
Under a star, with shining hair.
She seemed like one who moved in sleep,
Her eyes were strange, her eyes were deep,
And when she looked across the night,
Beneath, among, those stars of light,
Into his heart she shot a pang;
A gleaming mouth awoke and sang;
Petals of roses showered him;
And white through dark leaves, shy and dim,
A face rose, peering, young and sweet,
Smiled and withdrew. He heard her feet
Run down the darkness, saw them gleam,
Low laughter trembled through the dream;
And thinking this one must be she,
He followed after, tremblingly.

Among the many lights he went,
Where faces massed like lilies blent,
And plucked her there, to make his own,
Above a music's undertone:
Music that cried intense, but after
Shuddered down to livid laughter.

The Charnel Rose

He breathed the perfume of her hair,
And pressed her arm; and suddenly there,
Shutting his eyes for fear of seeing,
Through growl of grotesque shadows fleeing,
Saw gorgeous roses fall apart,
Each to disclose a charnel heart,
Each of them with a toad at heart.

He kissed her eyes, and followed her,
Feeling strange lights around him blur.
The world grew small beneath his feet.
He made bright star fields of the street,
And felt upon his lifted face
A moon-wind blowing cool from space.
Her hand upon his arm lay white,
Ghostly with powder in that light;
Her dress was soft and lightly blew,
Like gauze of fire it pierced him through.
And when beneath a lamp she stood
And smiled, in subtly fugitive mood,
Withdrawing swiftly down her eyes
To a remote dark void of skies,
He shrank upon a verge of death,
Thinking it sweet to draw his breath.

The Charnel Rose

She was alive and moved with him:
Her step kept pace with his. And dim,
Her face, half seen in darkness there,
Soft in a shadowy gleam of hair,
Rose at his shoulder, as her feet
Moved through the silence of the street . . .
But in his heart an echo came
Of thick dust quaking under flame;
And he saw red roses drop apart
Each to disclose a charnel heart . . .

Pale walls enclosed them. One light shed
A yellow flicker across a bed.
Loud steps rang through the street, and then
The hush of stars blew down again.
Green leaves pushed up through yielding air,
To drink the light. She loosed her hair,
Quivering, reaching out white hands . . .
Along the wide and moonlit sands
The moonlit surf rushed softly in
With a remote and whispered din,
To break and spread and shoot and seethe,
Thickly above the sands to breathe.

The Charnel Rose

The full moon showered her silver down
Across the sea sands white and brown.
Silver leaves of poplar tree
Shivered in shadow by the sea.
And then the sands were hollowed out,
Crumbled and sank; with sudden shout
The waves recoiled, and clashed, and fell,
The moon whirled round like tongue of bell,
The sea caved in, a rotten thing,
A nauseous darkness crouched to spring,
Blacks and yellows before him reeled,
Bells in his dark brain sickly pealed,
Between his fingers a fleet light slipped,
Was gone, was lost . . . Thick minutes dripped . . .
Rose-wreathed skeletons then advanced
And heavily lifted feet and danced;
And he saw red roses drop apart,
Each to disclose a charnel heart,
Each with a venomous mouth at heart.

He looked with loathing in her eyes:
Hideous void of twilight skies;
Evening skies with bats therein.
He saw thick powder upon her skin.

This was not she! He rose, withdrew.
Cool surge of night across him blew.
He heard an echo of distant sea
Rise and fall, untiringly,
Far in the night—or in his brain—
And sought her by the sea again.

III.

And a silent star slipped golden down the darkness,
Taking his life with it, like a little cloud,
Consumed in fire and speed, diffused in darkness.
Tangled and pulled together, the vanished years,
His voice, his lifted hands,
Were ravelled and sped; and by the sea he bowed
And dreamed of the foam that went back into the sea,
And the wandering leaves that went back into the tree.

IV.

Roses, he mused, were kin to her,
Sweet mouths of dust. And knowing these
He might more surely win to her,
Speak her own native tongue, and please.

What subtle kinship, then, was this,
That made him tremble at a breath?
In leaves, she was near enough to kiss,
And yet, impalpable as death.
When he dug earth, he tore apart
Soft roots of her. She fled from him.
Her sweetness, in a crocus heart,
If probed for ruthlessly, would swim
Lazily thin away on air,
Not to be seized by hands. She fled
Before him, unseen, everywhere,—
A golden bloom behind her shed.
Music he heard run under earth,
Like flow of fire. He heard her sing.
Upward it broke, a bubbled mirth,
A fugitive and amazing thing.
It flashed before his crazy feet,
He danced therein, it would not stay,
His hands upon its brightness beat,
But still it broke and beamed away.
'O bird!' he cried: 'if bird you are!
Keep still your frantic wings a while!—'
He danced beneath an evening star,
And sought to capture it by guile.

But fragrance died upon a gust,
And radiance on the darkness died,
And all he kept was pollen dust;
Poor soul that cried and cried.

v.

The moon rose, and the moon set;
And the stars rushed up and whirled and set;
And again they swarmed, after a shaft of sunlight;
And the blue dusk closed above him, like an ocean of
regret.

White fires were lit upon the tops of towers,
Monstrous and black the towers shouldered the sky.
The ghostly fountain shot and tumbled in showers,
Gaunt leaves leaned down above it, thirstily.
The gold fish, and the fish with fins of silver,
Quivered in lamplight, rose with sinister eye,
And darted into the darkness, silently.

The faces that looked at him were his own faces,
Ghastly and pale with unfulfilled desire.
They streamed along the streets, they licked like fire,
Flowed with undulant paces,

The Charnel Rose

Reflected in the darkness stared at him,
Contemplative, despairing,
Swept silently aside, becoming dim,
With a vague impotent gesture at the sky,
Uncontrolled and little caring.
And he watched them with an introspective eye.

To shape this world of leaderless ghostly passions—
Or else be mobbed by it—there was the riddle.
Green leaves above him whispered the slow question,
Black ripples on the pool chuckled of passions.
And between the uneasy shoulders of two trees,
Huge against impalpable gust of blue,
A golden star slipped down to leafy seas,
A star he somehow knew.

Youths came after him, laughing, but he fled them:
He heard them mock him, in affected tones.
Their lamia mouths, so smiling, bade him dread them.
Their hands were soft, but cold as stones.
His own face leered at him, with timid lust,
Was overwhelmed with night.
He turned aside, and walked in graveyard dust,—
In the soft, dew-dabbled, clinging dust,—

And terror seized him, seeing the stones so white,
And the wet grass, frozen and motionless in moonlight;
And the green-tongued moonlight crawling in thick dust.

Was it murky vapor, here, that dulled the stars?
Or his own guilty breath that clouded heaven?
Pale hands struck down with spades.
And it was he, with dew upon his face,
Who dug the raw earth in that dripping place,
Turning his back on heaven.
And it was he who found the desired dead,
And kissed the languid and dishevelled head;
While shadows frisked about him in the moonlight,
Whirled and capered and leapt,
Caught each other and mimicked lust in the moonlight,
In the dew-wet dust, above the dead who slept.

But this—was it this he rose from and desired?
Black mould of leaves clung wetly about his feet.
He was lost, and alone, and tired,
A mist curled round him coldly, kissed his face,
Shadows with eyes were gathering in that place,
And he dreamed of a lamplit street.

But roses fell thickly through the darkness,
They writhed before him out of the mould,
They opened their hearts to pour out darkness,
Darkness of flesh, of lust grown old,
Black mist of sin. He struggled against them, beat,
Broke them with hands to feel their blood flow warm,
Reeled, when they opened their hearts, vertiginous, sweet,
Feeling them with their eyes closed push and swarm,
Clinging about his throat, pressing his mouth,
Beating his temples, striving to choke his breath . . .
Help, you stars!—wet darkness showered upon him.
He was dissolved in a deep cold dream of death.

White fires were lit upon the tops of towers,
Monstrous and black the towers shouldered the sky.
The ghostly fountain shot and tumbled in showers,
Gaunt leaves leaned down above it, thirstily.
The gold fish, and the fish with fins of silver,
Quivered in lamplight, rose with sinister eye,
And darted into the darkness silently.

And he looked with laughter upon the lamplit ripples
Each with its little image of the light,
And thought the minds of men were like black ripples,
Ripples of darkness, darkly huddled in night,
Each of them with its image of lamp or star,
Thinking itself the star.

And it seemed to him, as he looked upon them, laughing,
That he was the star they all in fright reflected.
He was the god who had been rejected,
Stoned and trampled upon in a filthy street,
Hung up in lamplight for young men to beat,
Cursed and spat upon; and all for saying
There was no life save life of fast and praying . . .
Or had he been a beggar, with bare feet?
Or a cruel ascetic, trampling roses down?
Roses are death, he said. He turned in hatred,
And saw red fires burst up above the town,
And a swarm of faces rising, green with hatred.

And silence descended, on dripping trees:
And dew-spats slowly dropped from leaves to stones.

The Charnel Rose

He had walked these gardens, he thought, before.
The fountain chuckled familiar tones;
The leaves rustled, like whispers along a shore.

And the moon rose, and the moon set;
And the stars rushed up and whirled and set;
And again they swarmed, after a shaft of sunlight;
And the blue dusk closed above him, like an ocean of
regret.

The Charnel Rose

PART II.

I.

Though seen but once, he dreamed of her.
She stood, with half-remembered eyes,
In windy sunlight, sinister,
Her bright hair dark against the skies.
Pale sands ran out beneath his feet,
Breath left his mouth. He turned and fell.
Before him fled her laughter, fleet,
And lost itself in ocean-swell.
Cold spray blew faint upon his face,
And golden sunlight warmed it there.
She ran, with half-remembered grace,
Lifting a hand to touch her hair,
Turned once to laugh, then, without sound,
Entered a surf of leaves. He called,
But his own echoes mocked him round,
On all sides he was greenly walled.
O eyes of music, mouth of fire!
O hands like water in the sun!
Up, out of darkness swam desire,
The drowsy-faced, the lovely one.

The Charnel Rose

O throat of leaf, O flesh of flame!
O voice like rain upon the grass!
He woke in ecstasy and shame,
And through the blackness saw her pass,—
Like music in a lonely place,
Above the sky, beneath the sea,—
Bearing a light before her face
In meditative ecstasy.

II.

And the moon rose, and the moon set,
And the stars rushed up and whirled and set;
And again they swarmed, after a shaft of sunlight;
And the blue dusk closed above him, like an ocean of regret.

And he looked up through the black mute leaves of trees,
Sick of the lanterns and the sound of laughter,
Sick of the febrile breeze,
And silently answered the stars, that spoke in silence;
The large bright stars that swam above this night,
Making a golden luminousness of silence;

And it seemed to him, at last, that they were kin,
They understood each other;
For he was sick of lanterns and the sound of laughter,
Sick of the febrile breeze.

Was it in this, then, that the secret lay:
Was this the holy flower of moonlight and sunlight:
The drunken nuptials of night and day;
The golden pollen, the silver dust,
Fire in the heart forever, light in the eyes,
Feet like flame for the earth, and wings for the skies?
Lotos of night, unclose! He sank in darkness,
And the moonlight lapped about him, like an ocean;
And the tongues of moonlight laughed, like tongues
of sleep.

True, there was darkness. But darkness could be
conquered,
Love would be light. He walked a narrow ledge,
Clinging to wet black rocks, to crumbling mosses,
While the huge seas licked at him, hungry, in silence,
White with fury, persistent with despair;
And serpents' tongues of blue fire flickered in silence.

And he yearned for the lanterns, now, and the quiet
laughter,
And the chuckle of silver fountains under trees . . .
He smiled, and closed his eyes to feel the breeze,—
This breeze that crept among the lamplit tulips,
And lazily shook the stars upon the water . . .
And he thought himself a star on trembling water,
A breath among the tulips,
Or the love of passionate lovers in this night,
Brimming the air with light.

Lie still, O earth of night-time! Fires are rising,
Invisible hidden fires that flow and mingle;
Under the rocks they glow, the pale sands melting,
From the deep central heart of smouldering blossom.
The dark air trembles,
Palpitant sing the leaves; the grass-blades quiver.
And now the little flames come like soft flowers,
Silently through the grass, the mouldered leaves,
Lapping in purple and yellow,
Licking in saffron or green, or gauzy azure,
From the numberless mouths of earth;
Wavering ghostlike over the quiet water,
Rippling along the outspread boughs of trees.

Magic of dust! His heart took fire with laughter.
He was the fountain's smouldering shaft of white,
The pool that trembled with laughter,
Golden ripples that ribbed the black with light.
Speed, earth! Let day begin. The grey leaves shivered.
Stars, in the clouds, rode down; their hooves were bright.

III.

And at times it seemed,
Walking with her of whom he subtly dreamed,
That her young body was tinged with wavering flame,
Hover of fire,
And that she went and came,
Impalpable fiery blossom of desire,
Into his heart and out of his heart again,
With every breath; and every breath was pain.

And though he touched her hand, she drew away,
Becoming someone vast; and stretched her hair
Suddenly, like dark rain, across the sun.

Till he grew fearful, seeing her there,
To think that he loved such a one,
Who rose against the sky to shut out day.

But at times it seemed,
Walking with her of whom he sweetly dreamed,
(O music beneath the sea!)
That she was flame of earth no less than he;
Among the leaves her face
Gleamed with familiar grace;
And walking slowly through old gardens,
Among the cool blue cedars,
Spreading her hands in the silent dazzle of sunlight,
Her voice and the air were sweetly married,
Her laughter trembled like music out of the earth,
Her body was like the cool blue cedars,
Fragrant in sunlight.
And he quivered, to think that he was the blade, in sunlight,
To flash, and strip these boughs, and spill their fragrance.

The Charnel Rose

Wind hurried the last year's leaves, their shadows
hurried,
And clouds blew down the sky.
Where would they be, with a year gone by?
Let us be quick: there is time to overcome:
The earth grows old, the moon is already dead,
But you are young, you tremble because you love me,
It is all we have. Let nothing more be said.

What do we care for a star that floats down heaven,
That fiery tear of time?
It spoke to us once, it will not speak again,
It will be no more remembered than last year's rain;
There will be other dusks for us to walk through,
And other stars will float down heaven.
Time is undone: between our hands it slips,
Goes out between us, the breath upon our lips.

Do not look over your shoulder to see it falling!
Shadows gather and brood, under the trees.
The world grows silent, it listens to hear us walking;
Let the star perish: we wander as we please . . .
Or is the earth beneath us an old star falling?
Falling through twilight to leafy seas?

The night grows damp: I will take your arm.
Follow the lanterns, lest we come to harm,

IV.

Green-fingered dryad, come out of your oak-tree!
Flash from your pool, blue nymph!
Leaves have whispered your secret, sands have betrayed you,
Water-lilies have told of your hearts.
Cold and golden and green-gleamed white,
Moist and naked and frail:
These are your hearts. Come out, green-fingered!
Rise from your pool, blue nymph.

She that I knew by the sphinx
Imperceptibly shrinks in your eyes.
The lotus uncloses and glistens,
I drink of your mouth in the dark.
Cold ripples chuckle, white bubbles whisper,
Your face is drowsy with love.
You stretch slow arms in the moonlight
And pretend to be watching the skies.

The Charnel Rose

Now you no longer escape me—I have you!
This is you, this light in my fingers;
This air in my palm!
These grains of sand are worlds of sunlight;
These grains of dust are worlds of moonlight;
I give them to you that you may love them,
Tawny nasturtium.

Rain slowly falls in the sleepy garden;
It patters and purrs and seethes.
How the young grass rejoices in cool bubbles!
It drinks cold silver.
The slow drops that fall from the eaves
Dig little holes among pebbles;
Or patter and glance from laurel leaves,
In tiny shatters of fire.

It rains, and the streets are dark;
The leaves make a mournful sound in the hidden garden.
It rains and the streets are cold . . .
But you, who walked alone beside that sea,
Or tossed your hands into sunlight out of foam,—
You that I never thought to capture,—

The Charnel Rose

Hearing the rain, you cling to me all night long;
Hearing the rain sing a mournful song
You hold my head on your breast and cling to me . . .

Green hills with sunlight flecked, and azure shadows,
Brown hills and blue, run down beneath my feet.
The sea mourns, and the sheep are scattered.
Tired of the shrill flute, I cry through the evening.
The stars are rising and I desire you.
We will desert our gods and meet.

Do we brush the dust from the petal by too much kissing?
Is the clear dew swept from the grass?
I am consumed with grief
For the dark wet bruise on the leaf . . .
But the seconds drip like raindrops, the blown stars fall,
I fear, at the end of night our hearts must pass:
Let us drink this night while we have it, let us drink it all.

If I should destroy you! But could I destroy by loving?
Trust me, this night!

O my beloved, I dread some death in this,
Something there is that perishes with the kiss,
I hear in your heart the grief of autumnal rains,
The lapping of mirthless sea-waves along your veins.
Is it you, I hold? Is it you? Or the earth, or the sea?
Answer me with your mouth and cling to me.

Rain slowly falls in the sleepy garden;
It rains: and the streets grow dark.
The leaves make a sorrowful sound in the hidden garden;
It rains, and the streets grow cold.
These are my hands that tremble upon your face,—
Trembling lest love depart from our shadowy place;
Lest suddenly in my arms you become a sea
Sending your numberless waves to foam at me.

v.

White fires were lit upon the tops of towers,
Monstrous and black the towers shouldered the sky.
The ghostly fountain shot and tumbled in showers,
Gaunt leaves leaned down above it thirstily.

The gold fish, and the fish with fins of silver,
Quivered in lamplight, rose with sinister eye,
And darted into the darkness, silently.

To shape this chaos of leaderless ghostly passions—
Or else be mobbed by it—there was the question.
Dry leaves above him whispered the slow question,
Black ripples on the pool chuckled of passions.
And through the shadows drifted his own white face,
With ashes in his eyes, where before was fire;
And he sorrowed for himself in that strange place,
And for a once more unfulfilled desire.

Were the hands of lust red with the murder of love?
And must desire forever defeat its end?
He was tired of this: he yearned for death.
He turned, but met himself again in darkness,
Pacing noiselessly, like a ghost, through darkness;
And upon his face came coldly his own breath.

These hideous roses, he would destroy them all,
Bruise them, and crush them down, under his feet,
They choked his heart, he felt them push and crawl,

They clambered on him, they writhed, they swarmed
and rotted,
Feeding their rankness on him as on a grave . . .
Help, you stars! Wet darkness showered upon him;
He dreamed of death, that death alone could save.

Cold wind dissolved him. White foam seethed above
him.
Green darkness drank him down.
Here was a cold full music like an ocean
Wherein to sink from death to death and drown . . .
Fishes gaped at him, with eyes like lanterns.
The sea-floor spread to take him, smooth and brown.
Under this ocean, were there no desires?—
The sands bubbled, and roses shot soft fires . . .

And skeletons whizzed before him, and whistled be-
hind him,
And heavily danced whenever the shadows hid them,
And stormed dead roses about his feet;
Flash, bright scythe of death! They danced forever.
He heard their tireless footsteps beat and beat.

And the music he had heard so long ago,
Now growing fainter and fainter, seemed ever to grow
Sweeter and more desirable. He heard
Far off a sound of surf; and something stirred
Memory of a woman once seen there,
Lifting in moonlight a golden weight of hair:

A woman who fled before him, looking backward
To laugh in the moonlight, always, before she vanished:
A woman of fire, a woman of earth,
Dreamed of on every star, in every birth.
O laughter, heard so little, lost so soon!
Come back!—Thus moans the sea to the falling moon . . .

And the moon rose; and the moon set;
And the stars rushed up, and whirled, and set;
And again they swarmed, after a shaft of sunlight;
And the blue dusk closed above him, like an ocean of regret.

PART III.

I.

Bright hair, tumbled in sunlight, and sunlit feet,
Light hands lifting in air,—
They are gone forever; they are no longer sweet;
And the slow dusk settles downward, a blue despair.

She, whose mouth I was once so crazed with kissing,
Whose eyes were like deep fires,—
The grass that puffs in the fields is far more lovely;
Less than the dust is she to dead desires.

Now let the shadows lengthen and creep before me,
And the old men die in the street:
Let the sun pass: we seek fantastic darkness.
Let the sun pass. Shadows are far more sweet.

Light now the lanterns, and let us see our faces,
New friends of goblin birth!—
Ah, but the heart sinks, leaving thus that sunlight,—
The lovers of youth, the young bright sinister earth...

He turned, and saw the world go down behind him,
Into the sounding darkness, as into a sea.
Voices out of the tumult cried to remind him,
Wailed, and were lost in wind;

Desolate darkness, the darkness of sad adventure,
Peril with watchful eyes,
Shut closely about him. Night blew out the lanterns.
Cold clouds devoured the skies.

II.

Wild scarlet crackled and crawled and gleamed;
He reeled in a poppy field and dreamed:
Sun-blots dizzied beneath his eyes
And fire licked angrily at the skies.
Cold thumbs against his hot lids pressed,
His heart dissolved, he lay at rest;
And before him over red fields ran
A shape half woman and half man.

Cymbals clashed. Their sound was scarlet,
Singing scarlet in his brain,
Red mouths blossomed out of darkness,
And the grass grew red with pain.

Before him over red fields ran
A shape half woman and half man,
He could not see that taunting face,
For green boughs backward sprang in place.
He ran, and in the yellow sun
The scarlet field grew dry and dun.
His feet were scorched, and he fell down,
Seeing the whole world parch to brown.

Horns prolonged were blown in silver,
Wailing silver in his brain;
Mercury eyes in darkness trembled;
And his dream was cleft with pain.

III.

Red is the color of blood, and I will seek it:
I have sought it in the grass.
It is the color of steep sun seen through eyelids.

It is hidden under the suave flesh of women,—
Flows there, quietly flows.
It mounts from the heart to the temples, the singing
mouth—
As cold sap climbs to the rose.

The Charnel Rose

I am confused in webs and knots of scarlet
Spun from the darkness;
Or shuttled from the mouths of thirsty spiders.

Madness for red! I devour the leaves of autumn.
I tire of the green of the world.
I am myself a mouth for blood . . .

Here, in the golden haze of the late slant sun,
Let us walk, with the light in our eyes,
To a single bench from the outset predetermined.
Look: there are seagulls in these city skies,
Kindled against the blue.
But I do not think of the sea-gulls, I think of you.

Your eyes, with the late sun in them,
Are like blue pools dazzled with yellow petals.
This pale green suits them well.
Here is your finger, with an emerald on it:
The one I gave you. I say these things politely—
But what I think beneath them, who can tell?

The Charnel Rose

For I think of you, crumpled against a whiteness;
Flayed and torn, with dulled face.
I think of you, writhing, a thing of scarlet,
And myself, rising red from that embrace.

November sun is sunlight poured through honey:
Old things, in such a light, grow subtle and fine.
Bare oaks are like still fire.
Talk to me: now we drink the evening's wine.
Look, how our shadows creep along the gravel!—
And this way, how the gravel begins to shine!

This is the time of day for recollections,
For sentimental regrets, oblique allusions,
Rose-leaves, shrivelled in a musty jar.
Scatter them to the wind! There are tempests coming.
It is dark, with a windy star.

If human mouths were really roses, my dear,—
(Why must we link things so?—)
I would tear yours petal from petal with slow murder.
I would pluck the stamens, the pistils,
The gold and the green,—
Spreading the subtle sweetness that was your breath
On a cold wave of death . . .

Now let us walk back, slowly, as we came.
We will light the room with candles; they may shine
Like rows of yellow eyes.
Your hair is like spun fire, by candle-flame.
You smile at me—say nothing. You are wise.

For I think of you, flung down brutal darkness;
Crushed and red, with pale face.
I think of you, with your hair disordered and dripping,
And myself, rising red from that embrace.

IV.

Music, withdrawing to a point of silence,
Took his heart down over the edge of the world:
Cliffs, and the sea and stars.
Sleep might be merciful, if it were dreamless,
But sleep was a rage of winds.
If there were only green leaves to assuage him—!
But the leaves were dead.

Dusk, withdrawing to a single lamplight
At the end of an infinite street—
He saw his ghost walk down that street forever,
And heard the eternal rhythm of his feet.

And if he should reach at last that final gutter,
To-day, or to-morrow,
Or, maybe, after the death of himself and time;
And stand at the ultimate curbstone by the stars,
Above dead matches, and smears of paper, and slime;
Would the secret of his desire
Blossom out of the dark with a burst of fire?
Or would he hear the eternal arc-lamps sputter,
Only that; and see old shadows crawl;
And find the stars were street lamps after all?

Music, quivering to a point of silence,
Drew his heart down over the edge of the world . . .

Dancers arose; he had not seen them;
Hissing cymbals clashed;
Scarlet and green together writhed in darkness,
Billows of saffron rolled against the darkness,
White arms shot up, eyes flashed,
The grass rose vivid green against the black . . .
But this was idle. His youth could not come back.
And the sharp brief flute-notes perished for lack of
breath;
The great cymbals were stilled with a hiss of death;

The dancers fell in thick dust, one by one.
The stars rose slowly out of streams of fire.
The dancers blossomed and vanished under the sun.

And the music whispered down to a breath of silence,
Sighing his heart down over the edge of the world.

V.

He reeled in a poppy field, and dreamed:
Live scarlet crackled and crawled and gleamed;
And before him, over red fields, ran
A shape half woman and half man . . .

Sickly petals were loosely shed:
No more the rose, the yellow bed.
Like a dream that life went down
Beneath black waves and white to drown . . .
Cold cypresses, in formal row,
Marched to a blue hill, bald with snow;
Cold flutes on shivering air were blown,
Thin and faint in sober tone.
The scant grass dulled beneath his feet,
A single star made twilight sweet;

And he went forward, smelling there
New incense on the haunted air.

Under that azure cypress grove
He saw white feet like silver move,
And white hands deftly lifted up
For dusky gleam of golden cup;
Voices in soft speech he heard,
Measuring dust in every word.
Through the veins of men like these
Flowed warm blood, or froth of seas?
Reedy were these hands: and chill.
His heart, beneath such eyes, lay still.

Roses out of the cool earth bloom,
Flourishing on a rainy tomb;
And music just as sweetly springs
From rain-cold silver strings . . .
Feeding on pale mouths, he learned
That they, no less than scarlet, burned;
Touching hands as cold as sea,
Foam in fire they seemed to be.

The Charnel Rose

Was this a dream,—or life, no less?
His soul was drenched with weariness.
Mercury eyes with tremulous stare
Fed upon him through greenish air;
They poisoned him, they burned his brain,
His heart grew sick with a yellow pain.

There was no day, but always night;
The leaves on all the trees blew white;
And yet, within them, he was told,
The sap flowed reddish, and not cold.
Pale hands,—drop my heart! he cried.
They pressed around him to deride.

With delicate hands they plucked at him.
With delicate mouths they leered at him.
He was not one of them, said they,—
Only the dull and brutal clay . . .
He heard them mimic, one by one,
Out of his blood. He saw the sun.

And cymbals clashed: he thought their sound was
scarlet.
And he was shouting between them, a thing of red.

VI.

The sun's blood turns to orange, and round the sky,
Flows in a broad low band.
The street lamp winks in the twilight a dismal eye.
The eternal mistress lifts her hand
To rearrange for the millionth time her hair,
With amber things out of an ancient tomb,
For the deathless lover who climbs and climbs the stair . . .

The stars above us,—they are like pale streaming bubbles
Seen by a sea-shape in translucent noon,
Cold and green, breaking to disappear.
Listen; and through the immortal hush you'll hear,
Persistent, those eternal footsteps climb,
Up creaking gas-lit stairs in perfect time . . .

What does it matter? there are white sands here:
Rippled with secular musings of the sea.
We have seen her comb her hair,
With her elbows shining bare;
And seen her turn the small brown sensuous head;
We have seen old roses opening by a mirror,

And darkness filled with rain,
And the hot unsteady lamplight on a bed . . .
But here, in the sifted dusk,
Where only a pure light settles out of the world,
We meet in eternal quiet,—talk musingly,—
On a white sand, silvered with spectral shells,
Rippled with the green musings of the sea.

Something there is in roses—you remember—
That's poisonous and red, torrid, malignant.
There was a savage music in them
Filling the innocent blood with swarm of petals . . .
But beloved, now we are free . . .
Now we are set in a love of deathless shape,
Immutable, brooded on by the sea.

Yet, it is strange—behind that altar,
Carved with cold foam of time,
Skeletons lay: I saw them in the dusk.
Shells winked between the ribs, and over the hands
Rippled the obedient sands . . .

* * * * * *

The Charnel Rose

The sun's blood turns to orange, and round the sky
Flows in a broad low band.
The eternal mistress lifts her hand,
To rearrange her hair,
For the deathless lover who climbs and climbs the
stair . . .

Have we not seen him climb,—or climbed ourselves,—
Up the eternal azure of those stairs?
Ridiculous, to those who stay behind,
Or chuckle, meditating, from afar:
The small pathetic back, in silhouette,
Dwindling against a star . . .

Why do we muse these things in retrospect?
Must we, being cold,
Reach out to sunset fires to warm our hands?
It is as if we were growing old;
And sought, in disillusionment, to cling
To something loved in youth, some daybreak thing.

Something about you fades . . . you are not he
Whom I saw first, with starlight in your eyes.
Your garments, once so subtle,

Dull with the insistent touch; and now your mind
Is a garden whose pools and paths I know too well. . .
This is the pain of knowledge. Good-bye, dear friend!
Between us mourns the surge of some old knell.

Here's change, in changelessness: and we go down,
Once more to the old chaos.
Wild hands repel and cling, the rash waves break,
A windy shout of voices blows behind us,
Once more we are forgotten, and forsake . . .

The sun's blood fades to orange; and now the sky
Shrinks to a faint green bubble above our hands.
The gliding street lamp winks a sinister eye.
Around it swirl grey skeletons on the sands.

I will seek the eternal secret in this darkness,
The little seed that opens to gulf the world.

PART IV.

I.

Through the deep night, the night of forgetfulness,
Men ran with streaming torches,
Pale mouths shouted,
Bright fires were bristling backward on the wind;
And he heard fanatic feet
Ring echoing into darkness down the street . . .
Into the night they sank. Bubbles of sound,
Dilating greenly upward through the darkness,
Showed him where men had drowned.

What towers above him trembled? Up them swarmed
Thick smoke of leaves, a fire of bursting roses,
Licking the windy sky . . .
The towers were smothered; they crumbled in roar of flame;
They crashed and spouted. And when they showered before him,
Strange things rushed out of them; and whistled by.

These men with bristling torches,
Filling the darkness with terrible cries and fire . . .
Falling and turning and sinking into the night,
Whipped by terror, or stung by desire,—
These were himself, rising in rage against him;
The sky hung red and bright;
And above the crash of walls he heard a cry,
'The time has come! Now let the tyrant die.'

But a sudden quiet dissolved the world:
And darkness, like slow music,
Filled the chaos of time within his brain.
A waveless silver spread before him;
The floor of the world was brimmed with level silence;
And he walked by the sea again . . .

To shape this world of leaderless ghostly passions,—
Or else be mobbed by it—there was the riddle.
Gaunt leaves above him whispered the slow question;
Black ripples on the pool chuckled of passions.
And between the uneasy shoulders of two trees,
Huge, against impalpable breath of blue,
A golden star slipped down to leafy seas,
A star he somehow knew.

Now came the final hour:
Sweet music, silver horns and silver strings,
Seduced from temporal air his willing feet.
Below him sang in vain that scarlet darkness.
Now should the infinite soul be made complete.

II.

I bring you candles of soft white wax:
Seven candles of clear-eyed flame.
Black webs of smoke above them tremble.
I tremble, too, with shame.

For your white face, by the candlelight,
Is a beauty I should not see.
I would have you lean down out of your frame
And glide away with me.

There is no one here. Come down, I pray!
Soft darkness floods the air.
I will caress your body with hands,
And stroke your moonlight hair.

The Charnel Rose

I will praise the softness of your face,
The whiteness of your skin:
The mystic marriage is blessed with feast,
And there will be no sin.

I will unloose your precious stones
And let your garments fall,
To see your dazzling nakedness
And so consume you all.

O holy lips! unclose for me.
Swift pulses shake the earth.
I am lifted up, I am lifted up,
On a smooth blue wave of mirth:

Invisible veins of fire there are,
Like hot gold through this air:
There is keen flesh beneath my flesh,
A breath upon my hair . . .

I bring seven candles of soft white wax—
They burn with a saffron flame.
Black webs of smoke above them tremble . . .
I tremble, too, with shame.

III.

Rain seethed upon him,—with black streaks through
the day,
With white streaks through the night.
Around a lantern undulant through the darkness
He saw old pale leaves fall.
Silent he saw them swarming over the light.
Deep darkness drowned them all.

Some edge there is in love—at the beginning,—
That flashes and dims. And so with all things sought.
He was an old white leaf, cold with the rain.
If rain dropped upward through the grass, he thought,
And fell to the clouds—and beyond the clouds to
stars . . .
Might love find consummation?

Let us invert the world.
Let us delude ourselves that dust may rise,
That earth relents at last . . .
Red lilies, rapidly growing, bloom in the darkness.
A pebble, dropped, is flung down soundless skies.

IV.

He turned in the dusk, and saw none coming behind
him;
He listened, and heard no sound.
'I am Christ!' he cried. His words were tossed into
silence.
Three scarlet leaves of a maple fell to the ground.
He smiled to himself; and against the clear green sky
Towered in black. He was night. The stars ran high.

But he felt beneath his sandals the pushing of roses,
And did not dare to move.

He turned in the night, and saw no shadow behind him,
He listened, and heard no voice.
'I am Christ!' he cried. A whisper of leaves denied
him.
'And while I live no more shall man rejoice.'
The moon rose, huge and cold, behind a hill:
The trees shook silver; he mused; the night grew chill.

Why was the world so mute, the world his body?
He smiled, to think it slept.
The leaves above him quivered along black branches;
Dew dropped beneath white stars.

The Charnel Rose

'It is the third day. I have risen,' he said.
Among the dead leaves, whispers crept.

'How did I know it was time? Perhaps I dreamed.
The dusk of the third day came.
I lay upon stones. A shaft of the low sun gleamed
Through a single crack, and a cobweb sang like flame.
Petals of blood had purpled those grey sands.
And the great rock was as nothing before my hands . . .

'But all this happened before, somewhere, I said!—
In this same twilight I strove from this same tomb:
Lifting with dusty hands a great white rock.
My eyes were dazzled with sun. They were used to gloom.
I saw that hill, black, on a sky bright red . . .

'But where, then, are my disciples?' He looked behind him;
And the blue night lay still.

'I saw black bats, as I had seen them before,—
In the sharp twilight. They twittered against the sky.
But it seemed to me that I stood on a sinister shore,
Invisible waves before me surged to die . . .
To die? There is no death. No death!' He said.
A thick bough guarded the moonlight from his head . . .

Disembodied, he flowed with the flow of night;
Caught up with stars and wind.
The moon with an army of red clouds hurried before him,
In a silent tremendous haste.
Seas clashed together beneath him; they roared and showered;
Earth shook beneath his feet.
And he stood at the end of an infinite lamplit street.

He rang a bell in the streets; lifting his voice,
Beneath the lamp at every corner he cried
'I am Christ returned from the dead.
It was I you wounded, I that you crucified,
It was I who wept and bled.

Did I not prophesy, three days ago?
You sealed a great white rock above my head.
And I come to tell you the things you do not know.'

Laughter rushed round him; they spat upon his face;
They struck him and beat him down.
Thinking him dead, they left him in that place:
Lying against an old wall, crushed and bleeding,
With the tremulous lamplight ghastly on his face.

And children mocked at him, and he could not answer;
For how could the dead explain
That all was predetermined, and all immortal?
How could he make it clear,
To children who came to kick him, and to jeer,
With the blood so slowly struggling through his brain,
That man's salvation only rose through pain?

Remote this was, and strange. A lamp grew dim,
Drawn to a vague swift streak along the sky.
A sinister planet poised to revolve on him.
He was a soundless motion. He could not cry.
And dark things whistled beneath him. And a cold
shade,
Bottomless, gulfed him down. And he was afraid . . .

And he tossed in the darkness, as one who in fever
dreams
Of bathing at last in the fullness of cold streams,
Bright, beneath leaves, by sand.
Roses, cover my body! I am tired of struggle.
Old twilight, take my hand!

He saw a green hill, clear, in the evening sky.
Three crosses fell. Night came. The stars flew by.

V.

To muse in the afternoon by a convent wall,—
Here, at the bottom of a vast blue well of sun;
To watch the lazy lizards breathe and crawl,
And know yourself the world and the lizard in one:
Let us lose ourselves, and all we meditate,
To melt, through dream, in the timeless dream of
fate . . .

The infinite mind uncloses like a lotus,—
And we are the heart of it. Come,—take my hand!
And drift with the drift of wind.
You a note, and I a note,
In a sea of music we tremble and fall and float.

That spinning world is an old, old recollection:
It dissolves in darkness. But the mind is not dismayed.
We were confused, a while, in loves and hatreds,
We fought for light or shade . . .
Now all is changed: we climb the solid air,
This azure light is a pinnacled carven stair.

Now what you muse already is on my tongue:
You smile and utter the secrets of my heart.
Somewhere, long since, there was a pebble flung:
From that drowned cry we start.

Somewhere I blossom. Somewhere my brown leaves fall.
Somewhere I cry, somewhere I sing . . .
Yet we are musing by a convent wall . . .
In a depth of sun . . . on an afternoon in spring . . .

We must escape this temporal flesh and place,—
Step freely away in dream . . . though lizards creep,
Rustling the vines, and a cool air chills the face;
A pulse of menace trembling beneath our sleep.

The Charnel Rose

There is no vine, no lizard! We draw no breath.
We are the soundless ecstasy of death . . .

I have seen bees, poised in the quiet sun,
Winnowing, with their rapid invisible wings,
Soft Judas petals littered upon a path . . .
I must forget them. I must forget them all.
I must forget this sun,—myself,—this wall.

Here, then, at last, grown weary of long pursuing,
We find the perfect darkness!
The infinite spreads before us, and shrinks to nothing . . .
Or must we remember, always, that sound of voices,
Our little cave of dusk?

Dancers arose: he had not seen them:
Hissing cymbals clashed.
The great rose blossomed with a clang of light
And withered in silent fire.
He was a part of the maniac laughter of chaos;
The rebellious chaos of unfulfilled desire.

VI.

Twilight: a cold green sky . . .
Low massed clouds, with dazzling sinister edges,
And a sea-gull, falling and falling in high pale sun. . .
Daybreak was sweetest, but daybreak must die.

Dusk,—the encroachment of poisonous shadows,
The leisurely lighting of lamps;
And a gradual silence of restless trees.
Along wet meadows, shadows to darkness freeze.

Mist of twilight in my heart:
I who was always catching at fire.
Mould of black leaves under my feet;
I, whose star was desire.

Earth spins in her shadow. Let us turn and go back
To the first of our loves—
The one who was moonlight and the fall of white
roses.

By CONRAD AIKEN

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